



*Advocating for women's rights  
and opportunities in Connecticut*

Appropriations Committee

H.B. 5016 Governor's Budget Recommendations

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My name is Amy Miller and I am the Associate Director at the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF). I am submitting this testimony to address the aspect of 5016 that seeks to consolidate the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO) and the Office of Protection and Advocacy (OPA) and urge you to reject this proposal. We disagree with the recommendation to combine these agencies. Each agency serves a unique and vital purpose, both of which will be dilute, if not jeopardized, by this proposed merger.

For almost 40 years CWEALF has advocated for gender equity for women in Connecticut. During that time we have witnessed tremendous civil rights victories in this state; some due to the actions of this legislature, others due to the actions of the CHRO to ensure Connecticut's laws are applied in the spirit in which they are intended. The CHRO is critical to the state's goal of eliminating discrimination.

The OPA is charged with the task to safeguard and advance the civil and human rights of people with disabilities in Connecticut. The CHRO acts on behalf of the State, OPA acts on behalf of people with disabilities. Both important and distinct, and, at times, potentially conflicting goals.

We understand that during tough economic times difficult decisions must be made to achieve a balanced budget. However, these decisions cannot be made at the expense of our most vulnerable populations. This merger will jeopardize the work that each agency does. These agencies already work on meager budgets. In some instances federal funding may be lost because of the merger, further reducing their ability to fulfill their (independent) missions.

To complicate matters more, the CHRO is charged with reviewing and investigating discrimination complaints from people who are members of protected classes – of which people with disabilities belong. It is unclear how the agency would manage this potential conflict of interest.

Today, while there is a high unemployment rate, that unemployment rate for people with disabilities is significantly higher than for people without disabilities (13.2% v 8.3% BLS, January 2009). Women continue to report that sexual harassment is a pervasive problem (nationally one-third of women report being sexually harassed at work). Instead of consolidating these agencies Connecticut should be seeking ways to strengthen their ability to effectively address their missions and goals and ensure that Connecticut is a place for opportunity and growth for all of our residents. Thank you for your time.